Telling stories in the picture: constituting processual and relational narratives in research with youth in East London

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1. Introduction

In summer and autumn 2012, Corinne Squire and I, together with our undergraduate research interns, conducted a small study with a core group of five young women aged between twelve and fourteen at the Keen Students' School (KSS) in East London. The aim of the research was to explore the possibilities that artistic practice might create for young people to construct their self-narratives, which are shaped by interrelations between personal, social and cultural resources. We were also interested in what visual narratives, constituted within the dialogic space of workshops, could offer for an in-depth understanding of participants' positioning within the multilayered cultural and spatial context of East London.

In this paper, I discuss how narrative research methodology, which focuses on the process bringing together multiple narrative modalities, could be used to gain insights into the ways in which young residents of East London construct and perform life narratives, and negotiate their positioning as members of immigrant communities.

After considering the intersectional context of East London that brings together biographical, relational, emotional, cultural and socio-political elements in the processes of identity construction for its residents, I elaborate on the methodological approach that constituted narrative-led artistic research practice. Methodologically, the dialogic-performative space of the workshops that is constituted over interactions and co-constructions in this practice enables a movement between various forms of narratives in the processes of narrative construction and analysis.

I then reflect on the dialogic relations within the context of the research workshops drawing on PRATT's (1992, 2008) conceptualization of *contact zone, a* social space where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in asymmetrical relations of power. Considering the research process as a contact zone, I argue that working across multiple narrative modalities expanded the space of the contact relations, which enabled the participants to consider broader context of asymmetrical power relations in which they live and tell their stories.

The paper concludes with a discussion on the relational and processual constitution of individual narratives in this research by focusing on the visual narratives within the artwork of two of the workshop participants. The fragment of analysis that I offer in this section draws on the assembly of visual, spoken and interactional narratives that emerged in the research process; it considers the interlinks between the materiality of the individual, transnational lives of the research participants and their relational imagination.

2. Researching in East London

Narrative researchers, who analyze meaning making processes in personal narratives, consider the social, cultural and political contexts as part of the narrative research processes (See SQUIRE, 2013; PHOENIX, 2013). Depending on the research question and its disciplinary foundations, researchers' approaches to the notion of 'context' vary. Some researchers analyze how personal narratives use and draw on cultural context (SQUIRE, 2013). Some others focus their analysis on the relational and societal construction of biographical narratives by looking at the interlinks between local and societal context that constitute the narratives as well as the research space (PHOENIX, 2013, pp.77-9).

Within the context of this research, context refers to multiple, complex relations of power, which shape both the micro space of our research, and the broader socio-cultural context of East London. East London constitutes a transnational context in which life narratives of research participants emerge. The cross-national connections constitute heterogeneous power relations, which are shaped by the complexities of culture, migration histories, personal identities, urban interactions as well as the constantly changing interconnections between the local and global (BHABHA, 1994).

Having been a settlement area for generations of immigrants, East London has a history of socio-economic inequalities, changing modes of social difference and political mobilization (BEGUM, 2008; EADE, 2002). EADE, FREMEAUX & GARBIN's (2002) research into identity and construction of imagined communities among Bangladeshi residents of East London points out the complex and contested understandings of local places and belonging within the context of contemporary London. EADE argues that London based Bangladeshis' life in the East of the city should be understood through imagined communities which transcend national boundaries, as these communities refer to their country of origin but also include global, supranational religious community, and multicultural elements of global London. Particularly, for second and third generations of British Asian residents of the area, identity issues become more dynamic and multilayered, as their belonging in their communities and London consisted of transnational and global elements, as well as their educational success. The identity claims of young people, their rights to citizenship, resources and space are figured by this particular context. It is also crucial to look at the relational construction of their life narratives, producing a nuanced understanding of their experiences of the transnational as well as the local cultures. From this point of view, it is useful to explore young people's involvement into the process of constitution of this context, through re-defining aspects of their identity in multiple ways.

GUNARATHAM's (2013) research with the narratives of British Bangladeshi Muslim mothers on their experiences of street life in the aftermath of the suicide bombings in London in 2005 delivers a nuanced analysis of the citizenship experiences of British Muslim women in the racialized space of East London. GUNARATHAM argues that the racializing of Muslims as suspicious, dangerous and disloyal citizens in the post-London bombings era has affected the limits of citizenship, matters of belonging and the right to occupy public space for Muslim citizens (pp. 2-3). The super-surveillance of Muslim citizens, within this context, has effects on gendered experiences of the city for both Muslim men and women. The anti-Islamic suspicion is projected onto the everyday life of British Muslim women on the streets of East London where they find themselves under public surveillance and scrutiny in multiple ways. In her analysis of the focus group exchanges between British Muslim mothers, GURANATHAM identifies the

precarious and temporal positions of the research participants in their negotiations in how to live in situations marked by the reconfigured racism and multiculturalism.

BEGUM (2008) focuses on another yet related side of the gender relations within British Bangladeshi communities in her study on geographies of inclusion and exclusion in East London. BEGUM points to the fact that the growing numbers of British Bangladeshi women in education and work have not necessarily led to transformations of gender relations, particularly in ethnically inscribed public spaces of East London. The bodies and behaviors of some young immigrant women are regulated by the collective norms of the communities about gender roles in society, in addition to the broader, anti-Islamic scrutiny in the aftermath of the 2005 bombings. Yet BEGUM's research with young British Muslim women in the area demonstrates that young women use the public space in a tactical way so as to tackle these constraints. They re-constitute their femininity in the ways that challenge the dominant views of minority women as obedient members of the patriarchal-religious communities, caught in conflict between the religious and secular traditions that shape their life in London. BEGUM also argues that the strategic positioning of women members of the British-Muslim communities contributes to the constitution of a culturally and politically heterogeneous space in East London.

In this space, the identities and lives of younger generations of immigrant communities, particularly, need to be understood through recognition of their heterogeneity. In their research with refugee communities in East London, YUVAL-DAVIS & KAPTANI (2009, pp. 57-8) point to the problematic construction of refugees in media and popular imagination in fixed and stereotypical ways. They argue that processes of identity constructions follow more than one pathway and should be considered both dialogic and relational. They suggest that the relationality between the individual and collective processes of identity construction involve both reiteration of racialized discourses on refugee identities and more contested, shifting and multiple processes of constitution (pp. 64-5).

Belonging, which involves social locations, identifications and emotional attachments (YUVAL-DAVIS, 2011) in transnational contexts, should also be considered as a constituent of the multiplicity and relationality of the identities in East London. ANTONSICH (2010, p.645) defines belonging as a discursive resource, which constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion (politics of belonging). As I will discuss in relation to the narratives of the research participants, urban interactions with the transnational and local are always interlinked with the politics of belonging, and how individuals respond to them. My discussion of the interactional space of the workshops and visual narratives therefore considers the intersectional context of East London that brings together biographical, relational, emotional, cultural and socio-political elements.

3. Research process

We ran the art workshops on a weekly basis at Keen Students' School (KSS) over summer and autumn 2012. This project was designed as a follow-up phase to the Visual Autobiographies project, which Corinne Squire and I had conducted (see ESIN & SQUIRE, 2013; SQUIRE, ESIN & BURMAN, 2013). The aim was to work specifically with young residents of East London in this later phase. Keen Students' School is a community-founded organization based in Tower Hamlets. The organization runs after-

school classes in order to support students from immigrant communities, in their education. As we had previously worked with students at KSS, we chose this community organization to run art-based workshops with after-school attendees on regular basis, with the permission of their families.

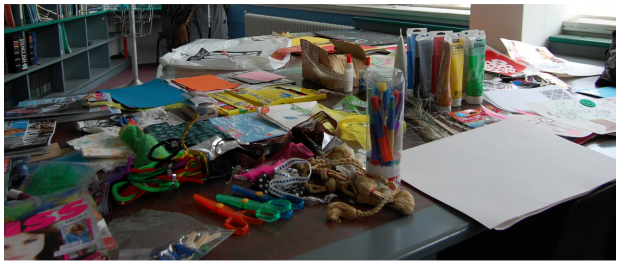
We got ethical approval for the study from the University of East London. It included the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check that was required for researchers to work with the participants who were under 18, and a consent procedure, which provided the participants and their parents with information about the research, and clarified for participants their rights to withdraw from any or all aspects of the research.

As KSS had a tradition of working with volunteers who ran study support activities, we could offer the workshops as part of KSS's regular study groups. We discussed the idea of running art-based workshops at the KSS with the school's administration. They agreed for us to run the workshops at the same time as the other groups; we were given the library space to use for two hours every week.

To recruit participants, we prepared a poster to be distributed to the students who attended the after school groups at that term. In this poster, we provided basic information about what we planned to do in the art workshops, and we described our research team as a group of researchers from the University of East London who were interested in life stories, including visual ones. The school administrator liaised with students and their families about students' participation into the workshops.

All the students who responded the call were welcomed to participate in the workshops. A group of five girls aged between twelve and fourteen regularly participated. Four of them were from Bangladeshi-British families, one of them from a Somalian British family. They were all born and raised in East London. The researchers' team was composed of Corinne Squire, **author** and their research interns Amina Begum and Ellie Carr, who were undergraduate students at the University of East London at the time. They were both recruited for this project as part of UEL's undergraduate internship scheme. Amina lived in the neighborhood and used to be a student at KSS. Ellie had had previous experience with working with young people in a community organization. Mikka Lena Perss, an intern from the University of Copenhagen at the time, also participated to some of the sessions. This structure meant that a group of young participants worked together, allowing for growing friendships over the period of the research, and that the same was true of the researcher group. Moreover, while researcher and participant groups were distinct from each other on a number of demographic variables (for instance, age, nationality, educational background), both groups met, albeit at the instigation of the researchers, to conduct activities that were new for all of them, and in an environment that held them together weekly for a dedicated and extended time.

Figure 1: Desk with workshop material



We provided a range of image-making material such as acrylic paint, color pencils, crayons and crafts material, and asked the participants to create visual images about any aspect of their lives. We did not give them any specific instructions but tried to describe them what we meant by making images about their lives. For example, they could make a poster for an imagined movie of their lives or a cover image for a book about their life. As researchers, we facilitated and participated in the workshops by engaging in conversations with the group about various aspects of everyday life such as life at school/university, families and friends. Each member of the research team made one or more images about or inspired by their life over the weeks that we worked together. We kept field notes about activities and conversations in the workshops. We also photographed the image making process.

In addition to visual stories, we conducted short interviews with participants about their images, using a narrative approach (RIESSMAN, 2004). In the interviews, participants were invited to talk about the details of their images, their participation to the workshops, and their interaction with other workshop participants. The interviews took more of a conversational form than a formal question answer exchange. We were particularly interested in the ways in which the participants constructed their images and their interactions within the workshops. We interviewed all participants except one, who did not want to give an interview, because she said that her images spoke for themselves, either in their family home or in the KSS library, where we ran the workshops. An additional consent from participants and their families were obtained through forms before each interview.

4. Methodological Approach

In this research, we considered the art workshops as a narrative space in which participants constructed visual narratives about their identities and location in the urban setting of East London, with reference to their transnational and local connections as well as popular culture.

Our method was a narrative-led dialogical approach, enabling us to consider both the processes of dialogue – within the research group and with the broader narrative resources - and the product, as well as the multiple positionings in the analysis. Following the methodological line that we had used in our previous research with visual autobiographies within the socio-spatial context of East London (ESIN & SQUIRE, 2013; SQUIRE, ESIN & BURMAN, 2013), we applied an extended version of RIESSMAN's (2008) dialogic narrative analysis model in this research. This model draws on the argument that stories are co-constructed in various interrelated contexts - interactional, historical, institutional and discursive (p. 105). In this model, narratives are analyzed at two connected levels. At one level, we analyze narratives as co-

constructed in the interactional movements between stories within any one text, including, between stories of different kinds. At another level, we analyze stories as dialogically constructed (BAKHTIN, 1982), in order to stress the constantly changing multiple elements in the construction of narratives, rather than reading them as finished products of particular circumstances that may change over time. As discussed in detail elsewhere, (ESIN & SQUIRE, 2013) our understanding of co-constructed narratives does not presume a dialogue between equals, but rather, refers to negotiations across multiple positionings shaped by relations of power. Therefore, our analysis of various forms of narratives operating within the process and generated as products of this study, pays specific attention to positioning in narrative constructions.

Exploring positioning in the analysis of narratives is one of the ways to understand the multiplicity and complexity of meaning making processes (DAVIES and HARRE, 1990). As DAVIES and HARRE (1990, p. 46) point out, tellers draw upon both cultural and personal resources in constructing their stories. The conversation between and across the personal and cultural resources of both narrators and audiences creates a discursive space in which narratives are co-constructed. Within this process, it is through the positioning of both storyteller and listener that their personal, social and cultural worlds come together in a narrative interaction. Having once taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors and storylines which are made relevant within the specific discursive practices that shape their lives.

DAVIES and HARRE (1990, pp. 46, 51) argue that individuals do not construct their narratives from one single position. As they draw on storylines, grand discourses and others' stories, storytellers' positions continuously change in relation to what discursive resources they deploy. This does not mean that storytellers move freely between subject positions. While the notion of positioning may suggest that people are choosing subjects, the interconnections between personal, cultural, social and political resources make storytellers chosen. In our narrative approach, we consider positioning as a process, in which participants shape stories in the picture by both their varying social and cultural positions, and by building up relational positions, as the members of the urban generations living in East London. In line with TAMBOUKOU's (2008, p.284) argument, we approach process as an organizing plane in narrative analytics focuses not on what stories are but on how their meaning is ceaselessly reconfigured by bringing in the heterogeneity of space and time connections that shape the narratives.

For the analysis that I discuss in this paper, in addition to context and positioning, I look at interconnections across narrative modalities in the process of co-construction (RYAN 2004; ESIN & SQUIRE, 2013). I refer to narrative in a broader sense that involves verbal and visual storytelling, interaction within the art workshops and interviews with participants. This broader perspective makes it possible for me to consider the narrative constructions through a movement between the process and the product within the specific context of this study. With a focus on this movement, I approach visual narratives as constituted by interrelations between individual and cultural geographies (DOLOUGHAN, 2006); as a space for narrative imagination, which involves a continuous negotiation and interaction between the self and other, between personal and collective thinking, reaching out not only to the future, but deeply rooted in the past (ANDREWS, 2014, pp. 7-9). The recognition and contextualization of multiple

resources in this space is a useful tool to explore the processes of self-making and world-making (BRUNER, 2001).

Within the context of this research, we considered visual storytelling as a technique that would give participants more space and a specific device to tell their stories, as opposed to the normativity, involved with co-constructing life narratives in research interviews. In that sense, the aim was to explore the emancipatory possibilities that visual narratives could provide for the participants (SQUIRE et al. 2014, p.43), particularly in transnational cultural spaces (O'NEILL, 2008). However, the analysis moves beyond the boundaries of what is told in still images to include participants' individual and familial stories, their experiences of the urban spaces, their stories of transnational communities, and narratives of research relations, by bringing together visual, spoken and interactional narratives.

In the following sections, I focus first on the exchanges within the space of the workshops to discuss how these interactions, as well as the visual storytelling that occurred in the workshops, constituted a *contact zone* (PRATT, 1992, 2008) in this research. I will then discuss the complexity of interactions between the socio-spatial context of the city and the narrative positioning of the participants, combining the visual, spoken and interactional narratives of two of the participants. I focus on these two cases because the participant's narratives, perhaps more than other participants', emerged across different narrative modalities (visual, spoken and interactional) allowed me to assemble multiple moments in their storytelling within and across all modalities. It is through these assemblages that I was able to analyze the complexity of the participants' positioning.

5. Constructing a contact zone in research

From the very beginning of our collaboration with the participant group, I was interested in the process, particularly in relation to the participants' responses to the idea of producing visual narratives about their lives. The ways in which they shaped the social space of the workshops and appropriated it to develop a friendship with each other, collaborated in the workshops to create their images, and used the discursive space of the workshops to talk about their identities and lives in East London, made me consider the workshops as a *contact zone*.

Mary Louise PRATT (2008) defines contact zones as

> "Social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination-like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today" (p.8).

Since PRATT introduced the term in 1992, in her critique of imperial encounters, it has been expanded to include the interactions between global and local, transnational and national, identity and difference, space and time. Particularly in studies of transculturation, the term is useful to accommodate critical questions about the reception and appropriation of dominant cultures. In her argument, PRATT defines transculturation as the phenomenon of the contact zone to describe how subordinated and marginal groups select and invent from resources 'transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture' (p.7). PRATT uses the contact zone to refer to the

space of imperial encounters in which historically separated people come into contact with each other and form relations. In this context, PRATT does not define equality as the constituent of contact zones; instead, her definition of contact relations emphasizes interaction, interlocking understandings and practices often within asymmetrical relations of power (p.8).

The workshops provided a space for contact interactions to emerge. Within the contact zone of the workshops, as a group, we had numerous exchanges that reflected the social context of our lives and identities. Throughout our conversations, collective drawing, image making, photo-taking experiences, all of us told stories that brought together the complexity and contradictions that constitute our transnational lives. The conversations within the group about going to school and working in multilingual East London also revealed the ways of experiencing 'otherness' in relation to the dominant culture and public and social scrutiny that regulate the life of some young women in immigrant communities.

The ability of the participants to see themselves through the eyes of others was embedded in many of the stories that they shared in conversations. The young participants of the workshops referred to the subtle ways in which the boundary between being English and non-English shaped their everyday life. For example, they believed that there were certain school activities such as school plays in which their chance to take part was slim; even though they all perceived English as their first language, the immigration history of their families and their Islamic dress code marked their difference broader social and institutional environments. In some other exchanges, the meaning of being English became a point of negotiating their difference. For example, in one conversation, there was an exchange between one of the participants and myself about why she would not take part in the play that was staged in her school. The play was A Midsummer Night's Dream by William Shakespeare. It was going to be performed on an outdoor stage which the participant thought was a nice idea. When I asked her whether she would have liked to have a role in that play, she responded saying it was an English play; it was not about her culture. I encouraged her to tell me more about the differentiation she made. I mentioned that she was British born, and culturally British more than someone like myself who migrated to the UK at a certain age. She said that she was British, but she did not feel her culture as English; that she spoke the language and lived in London, but her look (indicating her headscarf) and her belief were different from the English people's. The response of the participant in this particular moment of the exchange constructed a nuanced position that is simultaneously on both sides of the exclusion/inclusion binary in relation to belonging. The complexity of the position offers a route towards understanding the heterogeneity of self-narratives emerged in contact relations.

In response to the earlier critiques of her definition of contact perspective stressing its vagueness in discussing the contact interactions and negotiations (see HARRIS, 1995), PRATT (2002) expands her argument of the contact zone to describe the pedagogical art of the contact zone as a collective construction that involves a level of sharing and revealing, of contributing and creating so as to free each and every person in that zone. The practice of contact zone, then, includes

> "…exercises in storytelling and in identifying with ideas, interests, histories, and

> attitudes of others‘ experiments in transculturation and collaborative work and in the arts of critique, parody, and comparison (including unseemly comparisons between elite and vernacular cultural forms); the redemption of the oral; ways for people to interact with suppressed aspects of history (including their own histories); ways to move into and out of rhetoric of authenticity; ground rules for communication across lines of difference and hierarchy" (2002, p.17)

The contact zone of the workshops enabled us to communicate with each other in a narrative space that is composed of visual and verbal storytelling, of conversations on several aspects of our everyday lives such as families, life at school, celebrities popular among young people at the time and the public events on the agenda such as the Olympics.

In their research with refugee communities using participatory theatre as a method, YUVAL-DAVIS & KAPTANI (2009) discuss how their method opened up a space for participants not only to express their recognition of otherness but also challenge the constitution of 'us and them' within broader relations of power. The contact zone that we constituted collectively in this research similarly functioned as a discursive space in which experiences of otherness were discussed openly. Moreover, these conversations led to further questions in relation to the availability of resources for the participants to contest asymmetrical power relations that they live in. Although recognition of their otherness or the collective regulations of the communities can be read as a challenge to a certain extent, we need to remember that the ability of the participants to consider broader inequalities that shape their lives is dependent on their access to social and political resources. The opportunity to access these resources is directly linked to the politics of inclusion/exclusion that operate on British Asian young people, particularly in the educational system. Although the system was designed on the principles of equality, the construction of the system does not always accommodate the heterogeneity of students' identities and interests in multicultural contexts such as East London.

The body of research focusing on schooling of South Asian Muslim girls in the UK suggest that gender identities and experiences of South Asian Muslim girls remain embedded within racialized discourses which are shaped by the stereotypical understandings of South Asian Muslim womanhood (SHAIN, 2003). The discussions revolve around the issues such as ethnicity, religion and culture that affect the educational performances of South Asian Muslim girls at schools. For example, SHAIN (2003, pp. 7-8) argues that South Asian girls' identities at schools are constructed by a number of stereotypical images that position these girls as the victims of family decisions that encourage them to abandon education to consider arranged marriages. SHAIN (2003, p. 2-4) states that in educational settings as well as other social contexts, difference remain the key to the construction of South Asian Muslim womanhood even though the girls are in the process of re-working religious and cultural aspects of their gender identity.

Within such a context, given their age and social class background, which may have had limiting effects on their movements, the participants could not always have access to material and discursive resources that would enable them to negotiate their will to be more included into those activities, even though they were able to link their limited participation into certain school activities to their 'difference'.

One important constituent of the contact relations was the way in which the participants appropriated the space of the workshops and claimed a kind of ownership of it, rather than positioning themselves in a hierarchy in relation to the research team. The appropriation encompassed both material and discursive space of the workshops. For example, we set a large desk at the centre of the room to encourage the participants to work on their visual narratives together, and we assumed that they would all regularly work on their pieces. The participants chose their own working space in the room from the beginning of the workshops. Some of them preferred to work on the floor while others chose different corners of the room. In some sessions, some of them worked on their visual pieces and chatted in pairs while others worked individually while chatting with the research group and other participants. In the first few weeks, we, the research team tried to describe specific forms to make visual images in order to facilitate the image making. The participants did not use any of the forms that we suggested, they produced their images as they liked.

At the beginning of the workshops, the participants expected us to comment on their visual material as if we were in a classroom environment. When we told them that we were interested in working together rather than giving them feedback, they started making suggestions on the pieces that we were producing. They asked us questions about the details of our images mirroring how we initiated conversations with them. These little exchanges focusing on the visual material expanded to include questions about our lives, our teaching, our students and our families. The exchanges between the participants and the two research interns were more informal than the ones between the participants and Corinne or myself. The age difference between the participants and us was one of the reasons behind this difference. The second one was the fact that the participants positioned Corinne and myself as teachers after their conversation with the research interns Amina and Ellie, who told them that we were their lecturers at university. Yet, this difference did not affect the level of attentiveness in listening to each other's stories. The participants were equally interested in my stories about my mother living in Turkey, in what Corinne told us about the studies of her daughter and Ellie's stories about her cat.

This appropriation made it possible for all of us to explore each other through stories about families, about life at school and life outside home and school. The tone of the conversations and questions about cultural backgrounds and belonging in the British culture revealed many assumptions about the British way of living or how the other lived. These assumptions included aspects of everyday life ranging from eating habits and dressing to appropriate behavior of young people, particularly in East London. For example, while there was a consensus within the group about the tastelessness of English food, the participants also considered pizza and pasta as English food, which they preferred to the Asian home cooking of their mothers. This narrative about the perception and choice of food that emerged in interaction, illustrated the strategic positioning of the participants' generation in relation to both cultures. They carefully distanced themselves from both cultures, and picked up an already appropriated aspect of everyday culture such as perception of Italian food as popular English food, in order to re-define a discursive location for their generation.

Visual storytelling as a method functioned well in what PRATT describes as *art of the contact zone* above. This method mediated a form of transculturation beyond the spoken language in the group where the level of the use of language varied due to differences in

age, education and linguistic backgrounds. It also became a tool for dialogic exchanges in the workshops. The participants responded to our initial invitation to make a visual image about their lives in varied ways. The form of the products ranged from abstract illustrations and landscapes to more graffiti-type drawings and posters. Artwork making turned into a practice of narrative co-construction, which involved conversations not only about the piece under production but also other aspects of life.

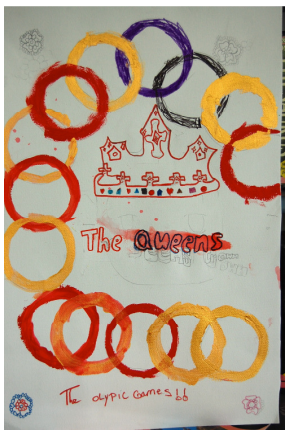
The end products were made through a process of exploration. One of the main explorations for me was the hybridity embedded in the individual narratives (told and visual) of the participants, which was linked to living in East London. This hybridity reflected the transnational and local relations, particularly in relation to their experiences of the city, where multiple gendered power relations were at play. Doreen MASSEY (1994) addresses the processual and relational construction of place-based identities while arguing that even among long-term residents, the gendered experiences of the city cannot be defied or compared in any straightforward way. She argues that the complexity of spatial experiences is linked to issues of power and inequality and their effects on mobility and access to resources. These inequalities do not always refer to materiality but also to control over social spaces, where space refers to social relations.

In the following section, I will discuss the complex and contradictory experiences of young immigrant women in the transnational space of London drawing on Alex's (a pseudonym chosen by the young woman) narrative that emerged across her picture, interview and our conversations with her in the workshops.

6. Complex interactions between socio-spatial contexts and transnational positioning

The art workshops constituted a site in which the participants constructed narratives about their multilayered connections with the social world around them. Within them, participants performed the specific formation of their urban belonging with links to both regulations of the local communities, the public and social scrutiny on their British Muslim identities and the public life of London. Alex's narrative in her picture is an exemplar.

Figure 2 Alex's image combining the Olympics and the Queen's Jubilee



> Alex: Er and like the Olympics was after it so I just got the idea of combining both of them together, so yeah I did those things. So I drawed the circles of the

Olympics around the crown Jubilee, I thought I would draw it like a picture of the Queen but I couldn't 'cause yeah it's gonna take erm like big space so yeah.

C: So were you seeing a lot of images of the Jubilee and Olympics around you? Is that what…

Alex: Oh yeah like every time I put it on a channel on TV yeah like you see people talking about the Jubilee and stuff like that so just the idea came to me.

E: Were you interested in the Jubilee? Did you watch it or was it just more that it was in your head 'cause it was just all around you?

Alex: No I see it everywhere so that's just yeah I wasn't very interested in it.

C: What about the Olympics, was that more interesting or the same…?

Alex: Oh yeah the Olympics yeah I've been waiting for that like for so long so…

C: Mm. Did you watch lots of it?

Alex: Oh yeah yeah yeah…(Laughter)

C: Yup, that was very good. There was quite a lot of people from London or even from East London got medals, I think.

Alex: Oh no, not that much of them got medals and stuff. Only I remember Mo Farah getting one and Usain Bolt.

Alex's artwork was an illustration that combined the Queen's Jubilee and the Olympics, which were on the public agenda of the UK at the time she made her piece. She decided to make a poster and worked on it in a focused way from the beginning although she was not sure about her artistic ability to make a picture. She got some feedback from other participants at times, but she mostly worked on her own on the piece. In her interview, she described her relation to these two big events in an ambiguous way. When asked if she was particularly interested in the Jubilee, Alex mentioned that she was not necessarily engrossed by it, but went with the theme due to the massive amounts of publicity it was receiving on television that summer. However, this was not the case with her second theme, the Olympics, which she stated she had been waiting for a long time to watch.

Alex was interested in these big events of 2012's summer, which affected the lives of residents of East London in many ways. She was quite reserved while talking about the level of her interest in these events. Yet, in her visual narrative, she positioned herself as a young Londoner, who was interested in popular culture, sports and the public agenda of the city.

Her reluctance about expressing her enthusiasm in the Olympics may have been partly linked to her family's expectations of her. Alex was the daughter of a family of Somalian origin. Her family wanted her to have a good, serious education that would give her security in the future. The family monitored her behavior at school and after

school classes. Her brother came into the workshops once or twice to check how she was doing. Throughout the workshop conversations, she told us and other participants that there was a classification of subjects that she could choose at school. Some subjects, such as science and English, were more acceptable than others. She was allowed to attend the art workshops because her family thought it was a suitable addition to a girl's education that would develop her feminine side. Even though she was interested in sports, her interest was not taken seriously. Her family thought sports was not appropriate for a girl's academic and social education. Alex was aware of the fact what she was allowed to do at school or in her spare time was linked to her family's ties with the Somalian community living in the neighborhood. Although her family wanted her to be academically strong, she was expected to be educated within the social regulations set for a girl, particularly in relation to her appearance in the public space where she represents the reputation of the family.

Despite the restrictive expectations of her family and social regulations shaping her to be feminine in a particular way, Alex was in the process of negotiating her position as a Somalian British young person with a strong individuality. She respected her family's traditions and appreciated their support for her education. However, she did not tell her story from a 'caught between cultures and traditions' position, which is the dominant view of young immigrant women of East London (Begum, 2008)**.** Alex voiced her enthusiasm for sports. She thought she was not good at drawing, but she did not perceive this as a weakness. On the contrary, she took the opportunity to do the activity anyway, and used her picture to constitute a self-narrative that brought together her interests in and her relation to the social world surrounding her.

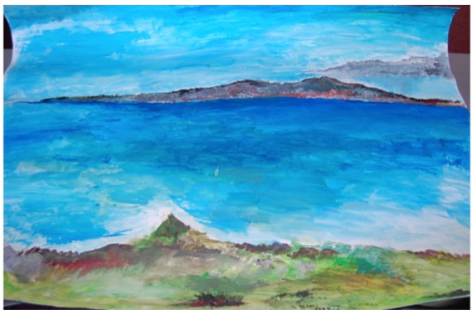
Visual storytelling proved useful in providing space for narrative imagination for the participants to challenge the fixed understandings of what the life narratives of young people in East London could be. It also worked as a constituent of a dialogic space, which made it possible to explore relationality of the narratives of the self in depth. In the section follows, I will focus on Samoya's narrative to discuss the dialogic space of storytelling, which can create the possibility to negotiate positioning and becoming.

7. Imagining narrative spaces of freedom and resistance

In her reading of the artist Joanne Leonard's photo-memoir, which is an assemblage of textual and visual narratives, TAMBOUKOU (2014) defines this dialogic space as a performative scene 'wherein the autobiographical subject, the researcher and the reader meet, interact and negotiate meaning about the subjects and their world' (p.30). Within this performative scene, the multiplicity of meanings is mediated without pinning down the storyteller 'in a fixed subject position or encasing her within the constraints and limitations of her story' (p.31). In this context, the storyteller becomes a 'narrative persona' whose story can be followed in the pursuit of understanding her multiple positions, rather than reading the story as the account of a unified subject (p.32).

In the light of TAMBOUKOU's conceptualization, I read Samoya's picture as an invitation from her, narrative persona which allows me and others to explore her landscape wherein she positioned herself as a traveller to a 'flamboyant, dreamful and peaceful' place, moving away from the busy, constraining spatiality of her life in London.

Figure 3 Samoya's landscape



> Samoya: I really like it, like, it's more peaceful, and cause we live in the city, and where it's so busy, you can see that picture and it's really calm
> C: Mm
> E: And if you we were going to use three words to describe the piece, what would they be?
> Samoya: Flamboyant, dreamful, and peaceful'

Samoya was a talented young woman who was very successful at art. She was planning to choose art as one of the subjects for her A level study at the time of the workshops. When she started attending the workshops, she had already made a plan about what she would draw. She wanted to make a large size blue landscape, which she would put up on the wall of her room – an enlarged and, it turned out, changed version of an image she had already made.

Samoya was aware of the constraining reality of young women's socio-spatial lives in British Muslim communities in East London. She told us the difficulties that she experienced on streets when she was out in the evening. There was a social monitoring system within the community which watched girls' behavior, and which was ready to talk negatively about them if it saw anything inappropriate. Her family aimed to raise her as a modest woman, following conservative values about women's role in society. Similarly to other girls, she needed to be accompanied by her brother if she went to classes in the evening. Even though she wanted to explore other parts of the neighborhood, where there were galleries and art workshops, she was not allowed to wander around without any appropriate purpose such as going to school or visiting relatives.

None of the participants made links to the public scrutiny on their British Muslim identities on streets while talking about their families' intentions to monitor their movements. The participants' narratives of family rules that restricted their movement on streets were rather shaped by the gender regime in which families raised their daughters. However, as a possible part of the broader socio-political context, here, it is worth mentioning GUNARATHAM's (2013, pp. 8-11) analysis of British Bangladeshi Muslim mothers' concern to protect their children, the younger generation in the

racialized public spaces of East London in the aftermath of the 2005 bombings. Similar to the mothers in GUNARATHAM's research, the families of the young participants in this research might have intended to protect their children from the racialised threats that they may face on streets when they set the rules for their daughters about how to use public spaces.

Samoya remained reserved while describing her picture in the follow-up interview. Similar to other participants, Samoya mentioned dreams, freedom and happiness while describing her artwork, but avoided making direct connections between the artwork and her personal life. Yet she positioned her piece in relation to the busy life of the city and described it as 'flamboyant, dreamful and peaceful'. Considering the interactional narratives in which Samoya told us about her limited spatial movement in her daily life, I read the landscape and her description of it as a narrative construct of an imagined space of freedom, perhaps as her 'technology of resistance' (TAMBOUKOU, 2003, pp. 94-102). TAMBOUKOU defines technologies of resistance as sets of practices in the cultivation of the female self, with the capacity to act and resist the power relations imposed upon them at the same time as they are subjected to certain systems of power, to craft precarious ethical positions in fashioning new forms of subjectivities. Samoya's narratives across different modalities are similarly constructed as a technology of resistance, shaped by her careful positioning between her dream of freedom and her restricted socio-spatial experiences, as a young British Muslim woman, living in East London.

8. Conclusion

> Working with the KSS students meant I could get a taste of what was meant by the term 'narrative' and understand how these are created in everyday life. It also opened my eyes to just how much one takes in from the world around us in order to create these narratives. While it may be argued that this is a given, the KSS research showed me all the little details that are picked up by young minds in order to form a sense of identity. (…) To this day, young women are affected by friendship formations, a need to explore themselves and search for freedom (Amina Begum, Research intern)

I begin the concluding section of this paper with an excerpt from our research intern's, Amina Begum's, reflection on her experiences in this research. This excerpt summarizes how narratives function as a dialogic space for the processes of belonging, in which multiple aspects of transnational lives are assembled. It also reflects on the link between storytelling and the need to explore oneself in what Begum calls the 'search for freedom'.

In this paper, drawing on our research experience with a small group of young British Muslim women in East London, I discussed what the dialogic space of a narrative research practice could offer to young people for the co-construction of personal narratives in a multilayered socio-spatial context. It is that same dialogic space that made it possible for me to explore the constitution of narratives by moving across multiple narrative forms, and to consider narratives as a relational construct in process. Using a narrative-led artistic approach to research practice, we constituted a dialogic space in the workshops wherein multiple narratives were configured through the nuanced interconnections between the individual and collective, between personal and

public components of socio-spatial belongings and between multiple cultural and discursive positions.

Within the contact zone of the workshops, throughout our conversations and collective and individual image making experiences, multiple interactions both reflected racialized assumptions about transnational lives and identities, and functioned as a tool to challenge these assumptions. In this space, visual storytelling as a technique expanded contact relations so as to lead to further exchanges about the broader relations of power and inequalities, and the availability of resources for the participants to position themselves in these relations.

Considering narratives as relationally constructed within the dialogic scene of this research made it possible to explore the participants' multiple positions in their self-narratives in relation to the socio-spatial world around them. Exploring narrative constructions as a process also opened up a path towards a more nuanced understanding of life narratives that does not encase them within the limitation of one told story or the storyteller within one fixed subject position.

The movement across different narrative modalities (visual, spoken, interactional and performative) allowed us to create a relational space for the co-construction and analysis of the individual narratives in a mobile way. To make assemblages using moments of storytelling within different modalities enabled us to consider narratives within a multilayered relational web, beyond what one single narrative modality can possibly offer to researchers. These assemblages can also widen the research space by making some of the narrative resources, which may not be evident in the immediate research setting, recognizable to both storytellers and researchers. Within the context of this research, these resources were the ones such as conversations with families and friends in various social environments, relations of education, actual and imagined experiences of streets, dialogues with self and others, which guided us, the researchers into the nuanced positioning of the storytellers-participants.

Another possibility that using multiple narrative modalities can offer is the discursive contact space wherein researchers and participants can develop relations in less linear ways. The non-linearity of the relations can open up new, maybe unexpected paths through which storytellers negotiate the potential of processual narratives in crafting ethical positions to challenge the hegemonic discourses.

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